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B I R D S

Brazil is immensely rich in bird life, which varies greatly in the different parts of the country. In Pernambuco there are many beautiful and striking birds, but the North American will find few if any old friends among them.

Two words are commonly used for bird in Portuguese, ave (from Latin avis) and pássaro, or more commonly with the diminutive, passarinho. The former is used to designate birds in general, but especially the larger birds. Pássaro, etymologically, means migratory bird, and was doubtless applied originally in Portugal where many of the birds are migratory, and is retained in Brazil, where migration is almost unknown, at least in the North.

One not totally strange, but which the visitor will hardly recognize as an old friend is the canary, which exists in the wild state, and is quite plentiful. Since canaries are said to be native only to the Canary Islands I suppose that these are the descendants of birds brought into the country, and which have escaped from captivity, or have been released. But, while they are not the bright yellow of some of the highly bred canaries, I believe there is no doubt that they are genuine canaries. They are predominantly yellow in color, but often somewhat greenish above, and the males frequently show a tiny trace of red on top of the head. I have seen as many as fifteen or twenty on my lawn at one time, feeding in the grass. Trapping canaries or other birds is a favorite sport of boys, or even men; and while our thirty-five acre school campus was supposed to be a bird sanctuary where they might not be trapped or shot, we found that a great deal of vigilance was necessary to prevent this practice.

The method of trapping generally used is to take a cage in which are one or more canaries (or other birds of the species which it is designed to catch), and attach to it a small cage with a spring door at the top, which is secured by a trigger, designed to close when the trigger is touched. This is called an alcapão. The cage is then placed in a location where canaries may be found, and left there until the wild bird, seeing another bird in the cage, comes near for love making or fighting, as the case may be, and, making contact with the trigger, is caught. Or the alcapão may be

placed in the open without any cage, and grain or other bait put in it to attract the bird.

The Brazilians are fond of pets, especially of birds. There is scarcely a house where there is not at least one caged bird to be found, and many houses have numbers of cages suspended all over the house, especially on the porches. These birds, all singing different songs, sometimes make a frightful din, or so they seem to me. But the people seem to like them all the better for that. There was a hotel in the town of Gravata, at which we used often to stop for lunch when going to Recife or returning. A long porch ran the length of the building, and was filled from end to end with bird cages. There was a big arara sitting on a perch on the porch, and a jandaia in the kitchen, and another parrot or two; and as my wife and I walked out in the patio (though quintal is the word generally used for it in Pernambuco) we saw what at first we thought to be a replica of a long legged bird, until suddenly it moved, and we knew that it was a real bird -- a siriema, small representative of the ostrich family, native to those parts. It is said to be good eating, and is considered game, after a fashion. This one had probably had its wings clipped, as they are capable of flight for short distances.

But the Brazilians have a faculty for taming birds. Some people think it is the Indian strain in them that makes them care so much for birds and animals. Of course other peoples too tame them sometimes; but it seemed to me that the Brazilians had a special gift for it. And it seemed strange to me that men should be so much interested in caged birds. In the United States it would be a rare sight to see a man walking along the street carrying a bird cage; but in Brazil it is very common, and the man seems to feel that it is quite consistent with his dignity. High prices are often paid for birds, and a great deal of time and attention given to the care of them. The housekeeper at our school used to have a little grey bird, whose cage was left open, so that it could fly freely about the house. It would hop about on the kitchen table, watching her at her work. And at any time she could hold up her finger and call to the bird, and it would come and alight on her finger. Stranger still to me was the fact that she had a cat which made no effort to molest the bird.

One reason that men like caged birds is that canary males are great fighters, and they are often put to fight, just as gamecocks are. A good fighting canary is highly prized, and people will go long distances to see them fight, and large sums are often bet on the combat. They are often seen fighting in the wild state, as well as in captivity. There is a corner of the market square where on market days birds and cages are offered for sale. Many of these birds have recently been captured in traps, and bird fanciers are always looking for something new. Sportsmen are always on the lookout for a new discovery of a valiant and powerful fighter.

One bird that is very common is the neat looking black and white bird about the size of a catbird, called the lavandeira (washwoman). Nobody seems to know definitely why it is so named, though some allege that a characteristic motion of its wings gave rise to the name, as resembling the movements of a woman in washing clothes. It takes a good deal of imagination to see any resemblance, however. The lavandeira goes about unmolested, as nobody tries to catch it to put in a cage, for the very good reason that it has a raucous, unpleasant voice. On two or three occasions I have seen a lavandeira being followed about the lawn by a bird larger than herself, though still not mature, I think, and entirely different in appearance, having some resemblance to a starling. This bird followed the lavandeira about, apparently demanding to be fed, and was fed. It must have been some sort of cuckoo proposition, but I never found anyone who could give me accurate information about it.

The sabia is the Brazilian version of the robin, and some specimens are very close in their resemblance to the North American robin, while others are of more of a rusty brown color. The sabia is much esteemed as a song bird, and is frequently kept in cages. The Brazilian poet Goncalves Dias wrote a poem entitled "The Song of the Sabia", which is known and loved by almost all literate Brazilians.

The tico-tico (i pronounced like English ee) is a yellow throated bird that has taken strong hold on the popular imagination. Children's reading books are full of references to this bird, and there is a comic book named Tico-Tico. There is also a popular tune called "Tico-tico no Fubá" (Tico-tico in the corn meal), which is sometimes played over North American radio stations.

A very pretty bird about the size of a mocking bird is the galo de campina (field cock). It is grey above and white underneath, and has a bright red head and topknot. While I know little of such matters, I should guess it to belong to the grosbeak family. It has a clear, ringing whistle, something like a cardinal, and is much sought after for keeping in cages, as it does well in captivity.

Humming birds exist in great variety, and of surpassing beauty. The Brazilian name for them is beija-flor (flower kisser). A bird which is interesting for the type of nest built is the João de Barro (John of clay), which makes a very secure house for himself of pellets of clay, usually on a large horizontal limb of a tree.

One of the most interesting birds is the bem te vi (literally, "I saw you well", but perhaps "Yes, I saw you" would be a better idiomatic translation). The name is derived from the cry of the bird, uttered in three ringing notes, which to the Brazilian imagination suggest these three words. Perhaps this is the same bird that W. H. Hudson refers to in "Green Mansions" by the name cascadee, deriving the name from the words suggested to the early French explorers by its cry, "Que est-ce que il dit!" A Brazilian boy, surreptitiously taking a bit of forbidden fruit in the early morning when he thinks no one is about, on hearing the cry of this bird thinks he has been caught, so like the very words are those three clear notes. It is a handsome bird, about the size of a blue jay, a rich brown above, and a golden yellow breast. I cannot remember ever having seen one in a cage, though they are very common; perhaps they do not take kindly to captivity. They are highly regarded by the people, however, and there is a children's magazine of wide circulation named "Bem te vi".

One bird that I frequently saw in cages, but never saw wild, is the xexeu. It is dark brown or black, with brilliant orange splashes, and by its general appearance and long straight beak suggests that it may be a member of the jay and magpie family. I visited a coffee plantation, whose owner showed me with a great-deal of pride two of these birds. Either of them could, and did repeatedly in my presence, open the cage door, by thrusting its head through the bars and pulling out a vertical pin which was inserted in a ring to secure the latch. They could thus get out of the cage at will, but preferred to stay in it. They would fly to the master, perch on

his shoulder, then go eagerly for his shirt pocket and look in it for a cigarette, with which they were fond of playing, flying with it to the cage, or to some inaccessible spot from which it sometimes took a good deal of calling to induce them to return.

Several varieties of hawks and owls are found. There is one very large hawk, with a white head like an eagle, which is called caracara. It is common in the interior, especially in the sertão, and is much hated and dreaded by fazendeiros because of its habit of attacking young lambs, kids or pigs. It is not quite large enough to carry off a lamb, I think, but often kills them in the field, or pecks their eyes out, so that they die, or at least are of no more use. I shot one once from a car, allowing the car to coast to a stop near the tree on which it was perched, and firing through the open window, as it would certainly have flown if I had opened the door.

Visitors to Brazil are never quite prepared for the abundance and ubiquity of urubus (buzzards). Not only in the interior, but even in the large cities along the coast they may be seen in numbers, perched on the houses, even the governmental palaces. They serve a useful purpose, no doubt, as scavengers, and doubtless spread disease as well. If any bit of refuse is thrown out, they are on it almost immediately; and people who keep chickens often find the urubus coming to fight with the chickens over any table scraps thrown out. They are particularly plentiful in the vicinity of the meat markets, watching for any scrap of offal. I had often heard people tell of the boldness of these birds in Manaus, where, it is said, they go right into the market building and wait, and whenever a scrap is dropped there is an urubu ready to pounce on it; but they do not attack the meat exposed for sale. I was looking forward to seeing that sight when I visited Manaus, and made a point of going to the market. It is a pity to spoil a good story, but I must confess that I did not see any of them inside the building. Perhaps that was a fast day for them.